The Trouble with Context

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Abstract

This is a polemical essay on 'context', 'standpoint' and 'difference' as questions in methodology and philosophy of educational research. It uses the 1946 Cambridge debate between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper to frame two key unresolved questions in contemporary educational research: What counts as a context? Who has the right to speak about which contexts? Describing new cultural and economic conditions, it argues for a different focus in debates over qualitative research methodology, and indeed in disputes over the 'speaking rights' of educators and educational researchers. A case is made for an educational research that works through metaphors and methods of travel, performance and profession.

The Trouble with Context

In *Wittgenstein's Poker*, a remarkable book that blends the history of ideas with investigative journalism, David Edmonds and John Eidinow (2001) describe a 10 minute exchange between Karl Popper and Ludwig Wittgenstein in a packed Kings College seminar room in 1946. Popper, who had been teaching in New Zealand for a decade following his unsuccessful application to teach in Australia, was presenting a paper to a Cambridge study group that included Bertrand Russell, Stephen Toulmin and others. Two generations of British and Continental philosophy came together that evening to engage in what some would later consider a pivotal debate: between Wittgenstein's linguistic contextualism and a critical philosophy of science being developed by Popper and colleagues.

Working from documentary sources and interviews with living participants, Edmonds and Eidinow tracked down different versions of what occurred. The room was full of academic staff and graduate students, many anticipating a dispute. The standard format was for presenters to keep their comments brief – 10 minutes or so, and then allow for questions, response and exchange. Wittgenstein's presence was dramatic and, by many accounts, electric – dressed informally, and accompanied by a coterie of similarly dressed graduate students, he tended to respond sporadically with the Zen-like aphorisms of his later writings. Popper's style was quite conservative, the product of a more humble working-class Jewish upbringing and training than his counterpart, who had been raised among Vienna's Jewish cultural and intellectual elite.

It appears that in the midst of Popper's comments, Wittgenstein brandished a fireplace poker and uttered something like, 'Consider this poker…' as a philosophical example before walking out in disgust. Whether Wittgenstein was overtaken by a rare case of critical realism and actually threatened Popper with the poker, whether he tossed it to the ground, whether Bertrand Russell, breaking his silence, said "Wittgenstein, put down that poker at once", is all lost in the welter of ethnographic and biographical description. According to Popper's later written account, he concluded the seminar by stating the moral principle: "not to threaten visiting lecturers with pokers".

Of course, as much as it might be documentary journalism, *Wittgenstein's Poker* is a deliberate playing with the genre of grand narrative, the reconstruction of myth, a kind of patriarchal epic of twentieth century Anglo-European philosophy. One of the many lessons we could take from the narrative is about the undecidability

of competing linguistic accounts of the same context and event, an irony not lost to Edmonds and Eidinow. But its substance is the new foundational dilemma facing current educational research: a dispute that goes well beyond the tired qualitative/quantitative divide (rehearsed in graduate school curriculum seminars) to counter hermeneutic, interpretive work committed to the contextual nature of knowledge and its ultimate undecidability, such as that advocated by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), against an epistemology and teleology such as that developed by Popper, built around notions that human intellectual endeavour and, indeed progress itself, do entail trial and error, and that systematic approaches to falsification can give us a critical purchase on what exists, what is knowable and, ultimately, what is ethically and humanely risky.

This debate – between a discourse-based hermeneutics and a pragmatic and theoretically-driven critical realism – runs alongside of the debates within Schools of Education and social sciences more broadly. It does so in the face of a move towards 'evidence-based' social policy modelled in the Bush administration's 'No Child Left Behind' Federal Education Act, whose approach to what might count as 'evidence' opts for a narrowly circumscribed version of educational research (Luke, 2003), in effect legislating a logical positivist brand of educational research that both Wittgenstein and Popper would brandish pokers at.

If there is a lesson of the last three decades of social science it is as much about context and its discontents as it might be about discourse and language. We can speak at length about the "linguistic turn" in the social sciences, affiliated with Whorf's anthropological hypothesis, with Austin's description of the "performative", with the work of Chomsky, Hymes and others in the 1960s, abetted by tenacious hold of linguistic philosophy from the Russell/Wittgenstein debates on the academy, and pushed along further after 1968 by Foucault and colleagues. Many working across the social sciences now begin from a position that says that discourse is not referential but refractive, not transparent but constructive and, at times, quite opaque.

But especially in light of political events over the past year, the claim that 'everything is discourse' or that 'discourse talks people and things into existence' is, at the least, a methodological starting point rather than an ontological summation – it is at best disruptive and generative, but at worst disingenuous and inaccurate in a world where discourse has profoundly unequal, potentially dangerous and life-threatening material and corporeal consequences. In this world, the question is less 'how does discourse construct the world' and

more, to borrow from Gregory Bateson (2000), 'what differences in discourse make a difference' – for whom and in what material and spatial contexts.

Wittgenstein's critique of Russell and his own earlier work was that universal claims could not be derived from logical analysis of language independent of an engagement with the apparently mundane "language games" where everyday speech occurs. Even the formulae by logicians and the taxonomies of positivists were, Wittgenstein argued, contextual in nature. In this sense, a related and equally powerful legacy for educational research has been what we could term a 'contextual turn'. Whether we speak of historical context, cultural context, face-to-face intersubjective context, institutional context, discourse context, political economic, policy and state context – the insight is that all of the objects of our research (human, epistemic, phenomenal, technological and biological) are situated, caught and only made meaningful in relation to language games (or, to speculate, Vygotsky's zones of proximal development, or Foucault's self-evident but analytically elusive 'local' and 'quotidian', or deCerteau's space for 'tactics'). Yet appeals to local context, once we've bracketed traditional concerns about generalisability, raise serious questions about validity, not just domain validity and face validity but a species of contextual validity, less typically the focus of methodology textbooks, but forming the very pragmatic and intuitive grounds by which readers, examiners and referees typically judge whether any thing of educational substance actually turns on a given 'case'.

For what will count as a 'context', as the 'local', or, for that matter, as 'a community', or a 'site' – however it has become a post-positivist mantra - is never self evident. We should persistently ask: Is that a context or an artefact of design and discourse? Or, to up the ante, we could argue that all contexts are artefacts of design and discourse - kinds of 'imagined communities' and 'localities' and 'temporalities' - though not necessarily those of the researcher. It is axiomatic in case-based research taught in postgraduate methods courses that a case is a boundaried or, to use a bit more postmodern language, 'bordered' site or instance or entity for study. Note here that the concept of "site" suggests that the definition and autonomy of a site refers to spatial constraint (A classroom? A school? A housing block? A living room?) Or "instance" suggests that the case can be a synchronic temporal unit (A lesson? A unit? A term? A semester?). Or "entity" suggests that a case follows some kind of embodied or organic or coherent assembly of primary or secondary features (A child? A family? A cohort? A 'group'? a 'community? Or even better: a text? A discourse?).

This remains one of the most interesting problems in case-based qualitative research, educational ethnography, action research and, indeed, in the varied approaches to discourse analysis, critical and otherwise, generated by the linguistic turn: figuring and prefiguring the boundaries of the local, the contextual and the 'case'. And it becomes increasingly more complex and complicated by the emergence of digital, nano and bio-technologies that compress space and time (thereby constituting and reconstituting new boundaries fluidly, synchronically and diachronically), that blur the biological and the artefactual, the bodily and the prosthetic, the macro and the micro, and enable the continuous globalised flows of discourse, bodies and material. In now commonly used theories of globalisation, we begin to describe these 'push/pull' effects in terms of 'glocalisation', where the blurring and blending of the global and the local, by definition the dynamics of 'within case' and 'outside of case', the endogenous and exogenous, intrinsic and extrinsic (and indeed, self/other and body/machine) are the central features and dynamic properties of new 'ethnoscapes' and, indeed what we could term 'eduscapes'. So how we translate old anthropological and structural functionalist versions of context into virtual, globalised, hybrid notions of case and space is a key unresolved theoretical and methodological question.

It is not only unfinished business for educational practitioners of case study and teacher-based action research. But as well, it becomes the focal question in an environment where new technologies and economic globalisation pivot on the compression of space and time, where well-documented flows of bodies, information and capital lead to a constitution and reconstitution of what might count as 'community' - while a substantial corpus of educational research advocates pedagogy and administrative strategies based on a teleology of "learning community" reliant upon late 19th century protestant ideologies and, indeed, mid-twentieth century suburban nostalgia.

But aside from having to determine what might count as the local, what's within and what's outside of any and every researcher's view – the focus on context also suggests that all research is situated, that the "little narratives" (Lyotard's (1981) *petit recits*) that we construct as part of our research are products of our own positionality and situatedness, however defined. This bit of wisdom - about methodological self-reflexivity and the degree to which perception is always the product of particular epistemic standpoint – is hardly novel and can readily be traced back to debates amongst 18th century British empiricists. In our own field, it crops up as the new-born field of psychology branched into educational research in the 1890s, appearing in John Dewey's first published works on the

"reflex arc" in psychology and is reiterated across the social behaviourism and symbolic interactionist legacies that draw upon Dewey and George Herbert Mead. In that other tradition of Popper and colleagues, issues of epistemological reflexivity are raised in Heisenberg's *Physics and Philosophy* (1956), where he reworks field theory, quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity to establish the foundations what would become chaos and complexity theory.

Of course, we can debate at length how all educational research is situated and thereby narrative and autobiographical: indexing our research by reference to our histories of struggle and desire, explaining our own political economies, exploring the cultural formations that might have shaped our dispositions, and the trainings that have made available particular discourses. That is, we can describe the contexts of research through a number of self-reflexive moves, speaking of researchers' psychological contexts, sociological contexts, cultural and generational contexts and so forth. There is, no doubt, a little narrative underlying each of the papers, articles and monographs students and scholars write – a story of the research that, indeed, is not altogether isomorphic with the research itself. Indeed, this might lead us to an alternative definition of plagiarism in a time of pastiche and intertextuality: that a text is a 'plagiarism' where it lacks an underlying autobiographical motif, however implicit or theoretically disguised. But beyond drawing attention to the intrinsic 'biases' of all research and writing – the concept of epistemic standpoint leads directly to the more explicitly political question about epistemic authority and cultural authorisation in the production of knowledge, about who has the 'right' to speak what, about whom, from and about which contexts.

What if the science that Popper aspired to is contaminated irrevocably by context? If science as we know it is never pure and innocent, less of a safe harbour than we were trained to believe, are there epistemically privileged positions? And if so, how is such privilege gained or granted? Speaking traditionally, is it gained through credentialed knowledge of a field: from the official qualification to 'profess'? Or can only people of a particular race, gender or sexual orientation, life pathway or 'situatedness' speak with authenticity, authority or veracity about the cases which they experience and inhabit? Does speaking without the sanction of those spoken about constitute yet again a form of colonisation, a form of symbolic violence – as Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders insist, having been the objects of scientific measurement and testing, specimen capture and museum display, monographs and refereed papers as much as the objects of genocide and physical violence?

In terms of our own work in schools of education, the problems raised are much simpler, but they increasingly turn up in ethics applications and research designs. Should only insiders speak? Can only outsiders speak? As I have argued here, the prior question is who or what in the shifting boundaries of case and context described above, constitutes an insider and outsider?

Reviewing the recent history of their field, American educational ethnographers Foley, Levinson and Hurtig (2001) describe the shift from 'outee' to 'innee' ethnography. Traditional anthropology placed a premium on the capacity of the field worker to become what was, in theory at least, a relatively invisible 'participant observer', one who was, preferably, without membership or kinship affiliation in the community studied. Without the hindsight of the Margaret Mead/Derrick Freeman exchange, however naïve this particular self-positioning of the human subject might have been, traditional anthropology was an ingenious and curious attempt to 'double' the social world. This, the will of the human sciences for objectivity or at the least for controlled subjectivity, was an attempt at a kind of distantiation, a doubling of the world by which the anthropologist could gain insider knowledge while at the same time acting as a Schutzian stranger, at once both 'making the familiar strange' and narratively familiar. That anthropological axiom sticks – for it accounts for the very practice of neomarxian critical theory and critical race theory, a denaturalisation of those particular ideological configurations that serve interests but appear, for all intents and purposes, to be given by nature, god or the state, taken as organic and common sensical.

With decolonisation, the civil rights movement, and successive waves of feminism – it should not be surprising that the historical enterprise of anthropology, so intimately tied in its various iterations to the subjection of the cultural, linguistic and spatial 'other' to the gaze of a formal science, caught in the historical mission of domesticating, preserving and emancipating the 'savage mind' – underwent perhaps a more profound identity crisis than other human sciences. This is in part because principles of self-reflexivity, of epistemological standpoint and view, are so intrinsic to its scientific and documentary work. But, Foley and colleagues point out, the very assertion of speaking rights and knowledge claims of diasporic, marginalised and 'minority' subjects called into question prevailing methodological and epistemological conventions. The queries came from two related but in some ways inverse directions: the realisation, following French poststructuralism, that all research, writing, scholarship and indeed commentary on the world was constitutive, constructive and a form of 'writing' that is intrinsically textured, undecided and historically located. Second,

the claims of people of colour, women, the disabled, queers, people of various 'colonised' and marginalised groups (and potentially everybody else) that they would not be passive objects of science any longer, indeed that 'knowing' their forms of life, discourses and practices could only be done by insiders.

This marked a new essentialism and emergent identity politics: an essentialism of ontological and genealogical, corporeal and phenotypical privilege that states that one must 'be' woman, or Aborigine, or disabled, or Asian-American in order to experientially or phenomenologically re/present the case of the female, the indigenous or the disabled with authenticity, *sans* neo-colonialism and patriarchy. That one must have identity papers stamped and credentials in order to speak on behalf, about and in solidarity with particular communities and cultures.

In this way, the traditional methodologies of anthropology became victims of their traditional objects of studies. The objects of science refused to be blinded by science and, to further mix metaphors, literally wrote and spoke back where they had been mute or ventriloquised before. What even the observed didn't realise is that their new essentialist claims would be subject to query next. Indeed, that for the essentialist and diasporic critique of science to be sustainable required a monotheism, a crude essentialism about cultures, category membership, about 'homelands', and their homogeneity as sociopolitical fields – almost ironically reproducing an exclusionary speaking position comparable in epistemic status, if not material and political economic power, to the Eurocentric perspective that had held them as objects.

At the point at which the empire began to bite back, well into the 1970s and 1980s, none of us taking our research training then could have fully anticipated that the then theoretical construct of multiple subjectivities – a construct whose generational appeal owed as much to LSD, psychoanalysis and new age spirituality as to Foucault – had and would have taken on an empirical, ontological facticity: that we as human subjects, our communities and cultures, were morphing and transforming in dynamic and unprecedented ways, in an accelerated fashion that was pre-empting the new essentialisms. That new combinations of communications technologies, available discourses, and the economic and geopolitical forces that reciprocally work and shape these technologies had the potential – then latent but now ascendant – to remake the local, to deconstruct and heterogenise any cultures, any communities, any languages and any identities. Postwar migration and desegregation had generated patterns not only of cultural exchange, but of intermarriage and family blending far beyond what

could have been anticipated in the first public policy debates over "multiculturalism" (Luke & Luke, 1999). In this regard, forces of cultural and economic globalisation have inescapable implications for research methodology as they reshape knowledge and identity, and indeed, remake what might count as a human subject and a context.

Foley and colleagues (2001) go on to discuss the emergent approach to ethnography, that of the 'halfie' or 'tweener'. Their case is modelled in the fascinating work of Dorinne Kondo (1990) a *Sansei* Japanese American social scientist. In the 1980s, Kondo went to Japan to study the impact of Japanese new capitalism on women's work and lives. Though linguistically and culturally more American than Japanese, she worked in the field with the symbolic capital of racial phenotype and, she found, attitudinally 'being Japanese'. To paraphrase Bourdieu (1991), the body not only remembers what might have been lost from generational linguistic competence, discourse and consciousness, it also signifies it both to itself and others. The result is a fascinating, now classical ethnographic case that shifts and blends standpoints and perspectives, moving from western feminism and political economy to a powerfully empathetic experiential account of Japanese women workers. Like so many of us working in education today, Kondo's work required a series of crossings of context – her research itself became a form of travel, a near-continual displacement from and 'homing in' on context. And it is in the documented dynamics of that travel, and its vexing shifts in discourse and optics, that we understand not just 'context', taken as a static 'thing', but rather as constituted by movement, dynamics and flows.

In this way, we could argue that the 'case' is never inhabited, that fencing off or in the case, living within it or outside of it, sneaking across zones by stealth of discourses of empathy – that these moves might purport to be the focal ones facing researchers but they really aren't. What actually brings Kondo's work and more traditional work of Mead, even Bateson and others together, is the methodological and theoretical sublimation of an obsessive concern with standpoint, based on an epistemology of optics, of seeing – to a focus on movement, on dynamics, and, indeed on travel. This begins to explain both how Mead got to Samoa, what happened afterwards upon her 'return' to the North/West, how her statements and texts travelled, and, indeed returned to the Samoans (via Freeman) and to us as readers. It is in the interstices and liminal zones between and within fields, rather than their polarised position takings – that the case is established, the view 'written' or stated, this was indeed Heisenberg's position. There are two issues here: how case based research is about travel, about how getting there

and getting 'back', is as important as 'being there'; and second, about how research reports, texts and documents 'travel' to what contexts, with which forms of validity, veracity and salience as texts and as intellectual actions made material.

The latter is particularly focal as we begin to reassess what might constitute a reflexive and collaborative educational research in the contexts of economic and cultural globalisation. If we are to construct a transnational educational research agenda that pushes beyond the anachronistic model of the acritical translation and transplantation of American and British educational research (both neoliberal *and* radical) to other national, regional and institutional 'contexts' – the question is, in part, one of how well educational research 'travels', how it can be 'resituated' as well as how it is 'situated' in the first place.

What, then, are the dangers of context? A warning sign can be found in philosopher A.J. Ayer's comments on Wittgenstein's version of Cambridge philosophy, that it became progressively "rich in technique but poor in substance" (Edmonds & Eidinow, 2002, p. 10). In the field of education, playing to context is a necessary precursor to a critical deconstruction that must continually struggle to normatively reconstruct or remake the institutions where pedagogy is 'done'. But only a precursor.

The great danger is a silence about what should matter: that we will reach a stage very much like that of the later Wittgenstein, a Zen-like stance about the necessity of silence about that which one cannot speak, eschewing all forms of normativity. Equally, a danger is that we will turn towards an intellectually studied self-reflexivity where fear of colonising our objects will transform the researcher's subjectivity into the principal focus of our intellectual labor, generating research texts that are narcissistic forms of infinite regression, where we second guess every statement and analytic move to the point where we begin to disappear in mirrors held up to mirrors. Where we are unable and unwilling to profess anything about our field - walking away from our ethical and political responsibilities to reframe and remake institutions.

While writing this piece, I am reading the final drafts of Elizabeth McKinlay's (2002) doctoral thesis on the use of performance ethnography as a pedagogy for teaching Aboriginal dance. McKinlay's text is autobiographical. Its fabric is woven with such intellectual and aesthetic clarity that its narrative actually performs the power of pedagogical research, not just to study but to re-envision and re-model intercultural relations, ideological and

cultural shift among white Australian students and Aboriginal artists.

McKinlay uses the thesis to work through her own complex positionings as a teacher and researcher, woman and performance artist. It is her second PhD and gives her a rare opportunity to reconnoitre her earlier ethnomusicological studies of Aboriginal music in South Australia, rigorously undertaken under the scholarly codes of what Foley and colleagues described as the 'outee model'. Since that work, not only has the field of anthropology changed but McKinley married into a Yanyuwa family in the Aboriginal community of Borroloola in Australia's 'top end'. She also developed her knowledge and expertise of contemporary dance and Aboriginal music into rehearsal of traditional dances with her family members and dancers. She writes

> If I have learnt anything from living in the spaces in between it is that there is nothing to be gained from hiding behind the 'austere' of academic authority, resting upon the powerful platform of white race privilege, nor of distancing the depth of emotion, feeling, this history of personal relationship from the classroom to in effect disembody and isolate experience from the teaching and learning process. (McKinlay, 2003; p. 264)

As one positioned, circumscribed, and scrutinised in so many possible ways – critiqued as white woman, as intellectual, as aesthete, as cosmopolitan, as outsider, as insider, as a sister and cousin and parent and partner – McKinlay used the thesis to actually 'perform' her way through these positions, teaching, dancing, documenting, theorising and working her way through these positions with both her Sisters and Aunties, and with the predominantly white, middle class university women she teaches. And it is through a kind of research as an institutional performativity of, within, around, against, through and to context that she proceeds. It is interesting as well to note that Kondo's (1997) later work is about "performing 'race' in fashion and theatre" and that recent Canadian work by Tara Goldstein (2001) models a comparable case for a critical anti-racist teacher education based on performance ethnography.

To explain her pedagogy and thesis, McKinlay cites Carmen Luke (1994) on the dangers of essentialist identity politics and privileged speaking positions:

> In other words, when I say I cannot speak or criticize because of my color ("I am white – I cannot speak about race"), or sex ("I am male – I cannot speak about women"), that position

> limits political engagement on two levels. First, it legitimates a refusal to examine why history has written scripts that used to silence women and persons of color and now silences those who used to speak for (and against) them. Second, given that historical legacy, those who are now silenced are prevented from repositioning themselves politically and epistemologically so that they can engage in the work of political transformation *without* reinstating themselves as authors of such transformation. (p. 51)

I am not a white male, not a product of Cambridge or empire, nor a trained philosopher – but I began this essay by claiming a right to speak about Wittgenstein/Popper's contexts. If there is a lesson to the poker incident it is perhaps less in what was actually said and done, however sketchy, less in the uncritical veneration of its speakers and particular historical context – and perhaps in our understanding and engagement with it as a knowledge-constitutive performance, a public avocation, where particular epistemic, intellectual and political positions were being put.

The grace and privilege of academic work, of research, not to be abused – is the right to write and speak both about and from context. Professing is, as Derrida (2002) reminds us, as much to do with avocation, an illocutionary performing upon the world as it has to do with the finding and uttering of 'truths'. But the two are not mutually exclusive. Particularly after September 11, we often see this as a matter of having the right to critique a government, a source of authority with impunity, without fear of symbolic or physical violence (Graham & Luke, in press). But the dilemma facing us is equally to consider at which points our right to speak itself is taken as a form of textual and symbolic violence.

Recourse to 'context', the ritual invocation of context, a studied sensitivity to context is needed – but it does not solve what ultimately are the sorts of problems that underlie all research: that epistemic decisions and methodological choices are moral and political ones, ones invariably woven from but not tethered to speaking position. These forms of research, Popper would remind us, can aspire to be at once scientific and normative, to speak to 'truths' and to scrutinise and debate which 'truths' have moral and ethical purchase, with which material and embodied consequences. Just as we should not be disqualified from speaking because of our context, no context or contextual description can or should let us off the hook.

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